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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 002824

SIPDIS

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BEIJING FOR APHIS REGIONAL DIRECTOR GREENE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: OPRC KMDR KPAO TW

SUBJECT: MEDIA REACTION: U.S. BEEF

¶1. Summary: Following the full-page- and multi-page- coverage in major Taipei dailies this past weekend concerning the official announcement of the second case of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in the United States, AIT Taipei held a press conference Monday (6/27) featuring Director Douglas Paal and Deputy Chief of AIT Agriculture Section Eric Trachtenberg to reassure the Taiwan public of the safety of U.S. beef. The Taipei dailies continued to discuss the safety of U.S. beef in their inside pages the next day (6/28), where they highlighted Paal's reassurances and Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian's and Premier Frank Hsieh's supporting statements that U.S. beef should not be taken off shelves. At the same time, however, the newspapers covered in great detail opposition legislators' moves to sue Taiwan's Health Minister Hou Sheng-mou for negligence of duty for lifting Taiwan's ban on U.S. beef imports in April.

¶2. In terms of editorials and commentaries, a centrist "China Times" commentary questioned the decision-making process of the Taiwan government with regard to opening the Taiwan market to U.S. beef in April, while a pro-unification "United Daily News" commentary criticized the inconsistent attitudes shown by different Taiwan government agencies in making decisions that directly concern the Taiwan people's interests. A limited-circulation, pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" editorial, however, stressed that science has shown U.S. beef is safe to eat. This editorial continued by stating that the Taiwan government has bowed to pressure with regard to U.S. beef - not pressure from the United States, however, but that of unscrupulous and populist Taiwan politicians. End summary.

A) "[AIT Taipei Director] Douglas Paal's Promotional Efforts"

Journalist Chang Hui-ying noted in the "My Views" column of the centrist, pro-status quo "China Times" (6/29):

". On the other hand, when [we] look at the Taiwan government's decision to re-open its market to U.S. beef [in April], Taiwan society cannot help but ask questions such as whether the decision was made in the best interests of the Taiwan people . . The crisis within [such a decision] lies in the fact that the Taiwan people thought that their government, if really interested in safeguarding their health, would demand that [imported] U.S. beef be one hundred percent safe, in the same way that any parent would do for [his or her] children, not minding having to take all the trouble [in making such a demand]. But the consequent decision-making direction was obviously the opposite. As a result, [we cannot help but ask] which peoples' interests is [the Taiwan government] protecting after all? Or, whose interests is it protecting, anyway?

"Despite various speculation, people outside can hardly prove who really gave the order [to lift the ban on U.S. beef] and why. The problem is that eating beef [safely] has nothing to do with whether you belong to the Pan-Blue or Pan-Green Camp. For the Taiwan people, what directly concerns them is the [safety of the] food that they eat every day, and it is an issue that they originally assumed and trusted that their government would do the best it could to protect them. It will be a serious crisis of confidence if [the Taiwan government] loses the peoples' trust on an issue like this."

B) "Do [We] Still Have Our Right to Eat?"

The "Black and White" column of the pro-unification "United Daily News" [circulation: 600,000] wrote (6/27):

"When a Department of Health (DOH) official said U.S.

beef currently in local markets does not need to be taken off the shelves, he was actually calling on the local people to calm down and to continue to enjoy the U.S. beef. Given DOH's fearless attitude regardless of any criticism against it, it would be very difficult for U.S. beef not to become a kind of rare and precious good even if the [Taiwan] government had no alternative but to ban it again.

"Whereas there are three different [government] agencies [in charge], there are actually four different versions about [the safety of] U.S. beef -- no wonder local people feel confused about whether U.S. beef is safe or not. While Japan, Korea and Singapore are still cautiously awaiting further assessments, Taiwan has already fearlessly embraced U.S. beef under the pre-announcement and the push of our president. The Council of Agriculture (COA) has opposed the opening of the market to the United States from the beginning to end, but [the government] simply skipped COA and directly had DOH open the doors to our market to please Uncle Sam. .

"Without doubt, U.S. beef is very delicious and our people need not over panic. Nobody can say no if the gourmets want to continue eating U.S. beef. In fact, what really has panicked the Taiwan people is not U.S. beef but the government's inconsistent behavior. Our government can easily throw away [our people's] right to eat, let alone its sovereignty to defend the Diaoyutais [ed: islands claimed by Japan, China and Taiwan]."

C) "Complaints over U.S. Beef Half-Baked"

The pro-independence, English-language "Taipei Times" [circulation: 30,000] commented in an editorial (6/28):

". Given these conditions, the [Taiwan] government certainly caved in to pressure - but not pressure from the US, but from unscrupulous, populist politicians. It should not have banned US beef, but explained clearly why such a ban was unnecessary. Those who do not believe in the WAHO's [i.e. World Animal Health Organization] science or the effectiveness of US slaughterhouse regulation could simply choose not to eat US beef. Let the market decide. Which last weekend it did; consumers flocked to the stores to purchase US beef, expecting that stores would cut prices to get the meat off their shelves before they might be compelled to take it off. At least the public has shown some common sense."

PAAL